CHAPTER 1

Buddhist Psychology

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

Since the subject of Buddhist psychology is largely an artificial construction, mixing as it does a product of ancient India with a Western movement hardly a century and a half old, it might be helpful to say how these terms are being used here. If we were to take the term *psychology* literally as referring to "the study of the psyche," and if "psyche" is understood in its earliest sense of "soul," then it would seem strange indeed to unite this enterprise with a tradition that is perhaps best known for its challenge to the very notion of a soul. But most dictionaries offer a parallel definition of psychology, "the science of mind and behavior," and this is a subject to which Buddhist thought can make a significant contribution. It is, after all, a universal subject, and I think many of the methods employed by the introspective traditions of ancient India for the investigation of mind and behavior would qualify as scientific. So my intention in using the label Buddhist Psychology is to bring some of the insights, observations, and experience from the Buddhist tradition to bear on the human body, mind, emotions, and behavior patterns as we tend to view them today. In doing so we are going to find a fair amount of convergence with modern psychology, but also some intriguing diversity.

The Buddhist tradition itself, of course, is vast and has many layers to it. Although there are some doctrines that can be considered universal to all Buddhist schools,[1] there are such significant shifts in the use of language and in background assumptions that it is usually helpful to speak from one particular perspective at a time. In all that follows here, therefore, it needs to be understood that we are drawing on the earliest strata of the Buddhist tradition, that is, on the Pāli literature that was composed in India somewhere between the sixth and third

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centuries B.C.E. It was during this era that the "core curriculum" of the Buddhist tradition was formed, and this is the body of surviving material that is chronologically closest to the time of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama Śākyamuni. Little of what was composed during this time was disputed by later traditions (insofar as it is included in the later Canons), but this earlier material lacks the myriad innovations and refinements—many incorporating profound and useful psychological insights, many responding to local and emerging issues—that came to be articulated in later centuries.

It was a very interesting period of time, intellectually vital and religiously experimental. There was a whole movement surrounding the Buddha, often referred to as the *Śramana* movement, characterized by the investigation of the human condition using various experiential methods. Many of these methods were certainly psychological, and we might even call some of them scientific. Rebelling against an orthodox intelligentsia that relied on revealed scriptural authority to guide a ritual communication with external deities, the *Śramanas*, or Wanderers, were more apt to use yoga, asceticism, and meditation to access an internal landscape and gain personal insights into the nature of their own minds and bodies. Their methods of inquiry constituted a body of shared praxis, and the experiences accessed and insights gained were largely repeatable and verifiable. Thus the tradition went beyond the contributions of a few individuals, and built up profundity and authority over many generations. The Buddha was both an heir to this psychologically investigative tradition and one of its greatest contributors.

The fruits of these ancient Indian investigations of the human condition, just as the modern field of psychology, can be usefully summarized under two headings: the theoretical and the practical. Theoretical psychology attempts to articulate models of the human mind and of experience which are based on both general principles and on detailed explanations of phenomena and their dynamics. Practical or therapeutic psychology seeks to heal human suffering or to rectify abnormal behavior through various methods of intervention and transformation. A similar distinction was current during the time of the Buddha, when all the religious and philosophical systems were said to be comprised of both a *dharma*, or theoretical teaching, and a *vinaya* or mode of living. In ancient India the term "dharma-vinaya" was a compound, suggesting that theory and practice were indivisible, and were viewed as two facets of the same continuum. "Whose dharma-vinaya do you follow?" was a common inquiry between passing wanderers. As is still the case today, the viewpoint one has of the nature of one's situation is central to shaping how one goes about living life; and one's lifestyle, how one behaves and chooses to live, will naturally reflect one's broad understanding of what it

means to be human. The dharma or theory has to do with what we know or believe, while the vinaya or practice has to do with how we act and what we do. The two will always mutually define and inform one another.

A MIDDLE WAY

The broad outline of early Buddhist theoretical psychology was remarkably similar to how we might frame the issue today: an organism, comprised of both physical and mental factors and processes, lives in a dynamic equilibrium with its environment, both shaping and being shaped by that environment as a response to various internal and external sets of conditions. The psychophysical organism has the ability to perceive or "know" its environment to various levels of accuracy, through mediating systems of sensory representation, as well as the capacity to respond and act with varying amounts of autonomy. The deeper questions, both then and now, have to do with the nature of this organism, the quality of its experience, and the extent to which it is capable of knowing itself and transforming itself in ways it finds meaningful. The theoretical issues have to do with explaining how it all works, while the practical matter is usually more about achieving and sustaining a state of well-being.

The Buddhists of ancient India faced an interesting dilemma in approaching these questions, one that is very familiar to us today. The existing explanations for the nature of the self (i.e., the organism) and its capacity for transformation ranged between two sorts of account, neither one of which seemed adequate. On the one hand is the theory that we can best view the individual organism as consisting of a mysterious essence, a soul or self, with a divine origin and destiny. By its very nature this self is ineffable, and is something difficult or even impossible to experience directly. In India the soul, called *ātman* or *jīva*, was thought to be something that preceded birth and survived death, and was reborn many times in different circumstances, some more exalted and others more challenged than the environments currently inhabited. It was also thought that this self could achieve a sort of apotheosis, and could eventually be healed of all of its suffering by absorption into a larger cosmic or divine reality. On the other hand, there were a number of theories that tended toward a materialist reduction. According to this view, the unique pattern of activity we call an individual emerges from a complex mix of impersonal factors and processes: substances, elements, aggregates, spheres of sense activity, patterns of organization, and so forth. These coalesce in stable systems for a period of time according to the conditioning influence of various causal forces, undergo all sorts of transformation and change as these factors are rearranged, and then pass away through disintegration to their constituent elements. From this perspective a person is born,

survives for a time, and then passes away, with no hope for further meaningful development or for reconciliation of existential tensions outside the limits of this life span.[2]

The Western civilization of the past few centuries, which has shaped the modern psychological tradition, has offered essentially the same range of options for understanding the human condition. On the one hand, religious explanations have revolved around a notion of the soul as something outside the measurable material world, and I think it is appropriate to include here the theorizing about consciousness begun by Descartes. Scientific explanations of the human mind, body, and behavior, on the other hand, have inclined toward a reductionist model that seeks to explain these phenomena entirely in terms of physical structures and processes. But a significant explanatory gap still remains between the distinct phenomenology of lived human experience and the physical processes that give rise to them. And without the convenient notion of a soul (however ill-defined), there is an additional burden of having to define and account for the issue of personal identity in a constantly changing environment, a matter of particular interest to psychologists.

What concerned the ancient Buddhists about these two alternatives is that one seemed to make too much of human beings while the other regarded too little. Like the modern theoretical psychologist, they could find no credible empirical evidence for many of the claims of the soul theorists, and unlike the modern psychologist they saw the human condition in a larger light and needed a model that could account for the continuity of personality traits over several lifetimes. This is of course a major point of departure between the ancient and modern approaches to the problem: the literature of early Buddhism indicates that although the techniques of mental concentration and introspection did not yield evidence of the ineffable soul, it did reveal that the continuity of individual personhood carried over many lifetimes. The problem with the ancient materialist reduction was that it did not provide an explanation of how this could occur. Although the modern reductionist is not faced with this problem, there is still the need for explaining how the wet brain can yield subjective experience that is textured and nuanced in just the way it is.

The theoretical psychology of Buddhism resolved the tension between the ineffable and the merely material, the eternal soul and the annihilated life, using a model that attempted to thread a line—a middle way—between these two explanations. The Buddhists were saying that we are indeed composed of impersonal material elements that are combined in special ways that account for the complexity, tone, and content of human experience. It is also the case that the patterns of coherent and stable organization we call individuality do not entirely dissipate at the

end of this lifetime; there are ways continuity proceeds after our apparent physical death. But this need not be explained in terms of a nonphysical essence that evacuates the body, bringing various individual characteristics with it, and then reenters another body at the moment of conception. One of the memorable ways of expressing the paradox of the more subtle Buddhist view is the phrase "Rebirth occurs, but nobody is reborn." This sums up not only the process of rebirth between lifetimes, but also of the nature of personal identity from one moment to another, as we will see later.

The objection might be raised that we are rapidly getting in to fringe material here, and that the contemporary psychologist rightly has no interest in attempting to account for life beyond the threshold of death. But the point is that the theoretical models developed by the Buddhists to account for this transition, which I repeat was a matter of empirical observation to them, required a unique and effective new approach: process thinking. They developed sophisticated ways of analyzing the human experience into a set of processes, functions or events, called *dharmas* (alas, not the same word as *dharma* used above), and of understanding how these arising and passing episodes of meaningfully interdependent occurrences are synthesized into dynamic, unfolding patterns of coherence. The world of human experience, in short, is constructed, and it is possible to understand—and to directly witness! —the manner in which this happens.

The process of constructed experience cannot be adequately expressed using the notion of a soul or of nonmaterial consciousness, for this would violate the laws of conditionality that account for the creation and dissolution of all discernable phenomena. On the one hand, if the soul is not constructed then it stands outside the causal order, which is unacceptable. Divine creation or intervention is not adequate to escape this difficulty, since according to the early Buddhists the divine orders of being are part of the causal system rather than exempt from it. On the other hand if the soul is constructed, then it can no longer be properly considered a soul, but is rather a changing complex of phenomena like everything else. Nor can constructed experience be explained as nothing more than the workings of materiality, since considerable nonmaterial dimensions of the unfolding reality can be directly known and understood by cultivating techniques of introspection. These nonmaterial dimensions of experience extend in time beyond personal death, but also in space to other spheres of sensation, and in the present moment to subtler levels of consciousness and human experience. There is also a qualitative argument to consider: since consciousness is the very tool that constructs meaningful human experience, such experience can never be adequately accounted for without inclusion of the nonmaterial qualia of consciousness. In other words, we cannot reduce to materiality a

process of which the material is only one of several components, the others all being nonmaterial.

SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

So what are some of the main features of this process-based model of the human mind and body? Perhaps the most unique and important principle of the Buddha's approach to the mind is the insight that the mysteries of the human condition are best explored in the dynamics of subjective experience as it unfolds in the present moment. Buddhist theoretical psychology is a science of experience, in which the stream of consciousness itself, as it is presented to the attentive and carefully trained observer, is the field of investigation. The entire Śramana movement was skeptical of the revealed sources of knowledge on which the orthodoxy was established—ancient myths, inspired hymns passed down over many generations, detailed sacred protocols for all aspects of the religious life—and appealed instead to the direct experience of each practitioner. Neither had they much use for schemes that relied heavily on logic, reasoning, and theoretical conceptual knowledge. Śramana adepts would go off into the forest alone, cross their legs, shut their eyes, and look very closely at what was going on. They would observe the various effects of fasting, breathing exercises, and other yogic disciplines on their experience, and they organized their observations and insights in formal teachings and systems of great subtlety and complexity.[3] It was a remarkably scientific endeavor in many ways, in which the human body and mind served as the laboratory for investigation. As such, the entire tradition is more of a descriptive phenomenology than a theory of mind. The Buddha was not saying, "This is what I theorize human experience to be." Rather, his message (paraphrased) was, "This is what I've seen in my personal experience." And further, "Don't take my word for it; examine it for yourself, and you too can see exactly what I'm talking about."[4] Much of what he points to does not require years in the wilderness to access, but is available to all of us in this very moment.

The first thing this introspective approach highlights is the centrality of consciousness. Our experience is ordered around and consists of moments of "knowing" strung together over time, much like William James's stream of consciousness. *Consciousness* is a multivalent word in English, and can mean many different things in various contexts. It is used here simply as a moment of awareness, a moment of knowing some aspect or quality of the subjective present moment. It might be a sensation, a thought, a perception—anything we are capable of noticing. What gives us the ability to have such experience is as much a mystery to us today as it has ever been. But as a tool consciousness yields the simple

ability to be aware of something, and this is the heart of the Buddhist science of experience. As a phenomenological pursuit it was not necessary to explain consciousness or to account for how it does what it does. It is enough simply to explore its texture, its range, its dynamics as moments of knowing are followed by other moments of knowing in the stream of consciousness. This is why Buddhists are so interested in the practice of meditation. Meditation involves bringing attention to the present moment of experience and observing what is happening there. The entire Buddhist theory of reality is built around the investigation of that moment of knowing, which is always present and accessible to all of us at any time.

By means of patient observation and, most important, the resolute reapplication of attention whenever it wanders (which it is sure to do), patterns in the flow of consciousness will become apparent. The second basic insight to emerge from this direct observation of the mind and body is that all human experience manifests through one or another of six sense systems. That is to say, all human experience consists of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking (in its broadest possible sense). A three-way interaction takes place between (1) particular organs of perception that are features of the evolved psychophysical body, (2) particular packets of data from the environment to which each of these perceptive organs is uniquely receptive, and (3) the process of cognizing or knowing these objects of perception by means of a corresponding episode of consciousness. The Buddhists call these "sense doors," since information enters experience through these gateways as travelers would enter a walled city or as a person would access a house.

For example, the eye is an organ of perception that has evolved to be sensitive to a certain range and quality of reflected photons, and along with its retina, optic nerve, and corresponding areas of the visual cortex of the brain it is part of an entire psychophysical system capable of translating "objective" features of the environment into "subjective" units of visual knowing. The light to which this optical system is receptive, as reflected by the various surfaces extended throughout our environment, constitute objects of visual perception. According to this way of understanding, the organs of perception and the objects of perception are in symbiosis; neither is primary to the other, and neither is meaningful without the other. From a systemic perspective, the organs and objects of perception cocreate one another, and thus experientially the categories of objective and subjective lose their meaning. But these two are not sufficient in themselves to yield human experience, for the crucial factor of consciousness needs also to be factored in. Buddhist thought understands consciousness to emerge from the interaction of sense organ and sense object, to constitute that very interaction, and

also to itself consist of the information carried by the interaction of the two. In other words, visual consciousness arises from the interaction of the eye and visible forms, and the coming together of these three factors constitutes what we call visual experience.[5]

The other systems of sensory perception construct experience in a similar manner: the ear, the nose, the tongue and the body interact with sounds, smells, tastes, and "touches," giving rise to the knowing of sounds, the knowing of smells, the knowing of tastes, and the knowing of physical sensations. The sixth system of perception, patterned after these five, consists of the mind interacting with mental objects to yield the knowing or cognizing of mental objects; the interaction of these three result in mental experience. The mental objects mentioned here include anything and everything in our inner life that cannot be construed as the immediate product of the functioning of the other five systems—thoughts, concepts, ideas, images, memories, intuitions, and so on—as well as any perception served up by the other five perceptual systems. When we add up all these components—six sense organs, six sense objects, and six modes of consciousness—we come to a list of eighteen basic categories of experience, which the Buddhists sometimes refer to as the eighteen elements.[6]

THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

And that, from the phenomenological perspective, is all there is. Which leads us to the third great insight of Buddhist theoretical psychology: all of our experience is constructed. According to this analysis, the "world" of human experience is woven together in our minds from these eighteen constituents, in six groups of three factors each. There are only moments of "knowing" manifesting in the six different modes we call seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking. This matrix of eighteen elements is the universal framework on which all of our experience is built, and we are incapable of experiencing anything that does not pass through one of these doors. This is not, at least from the perspective of early Buddhism, an idealist philosophical position that reduces material phenomena to the mental. Neither is it in itself denying that there is a great world out there including mountains and oceans and stars. It is merely concentrating its attention on a description of what one observes when one regards the details of lived experience. Because this is all that really matters. Buddhist psychology is built on a study of "that which appears," and considers metaphysical and ontological questions to be largely irrelevant. The *content* of the data coming into the system from the outside world through the senses is not nearly as important as understanding the *process* by which this data is handled by the system. Since we are translating certain features of the environment (e.g., photons,

wave patterns, molecules) into an internal language of consciousness (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, tastes), the "text" written in that language becomes far more significant than the raw material from which it was compiled. The transformation process from the outer to the inner life is so profound as we create a cognizable reality that any attempt at "objective" assessment of the preconstructed world is doomed from the outset to be nothing more than another construction. The world of our experience is structured in such a way that it becomes fundamentally impossible to work in any realm other than that of the derived subjective construction. The only world we can explore is the inner world, which is really just a virtual world.

So the study of reality becomes the study of the human construction of experience, and this is why early Buddhism is so thoroughly psychological in nature. Each of us is constructing our own reality, and understanding how we do this becomes crucial to our ability to experience happiness and meaning in our lives. Some of the principles we must follow in the process are universal, and the Buddhist tradition has much to say about these. Other aspects of the construction process are personal and arise out of unique conditions for each of us, and understanding these forms the basis for personal spiritual development and self-understanding.

One of the things that is so interesting about our construction of ourselves and our experience is that at times it is not very refined. There is a way in which we are "cobbling together" the moment as best we can. How we construct any moment's experience, how we see and hear and think and react to anything in the environment, is going to be conditioned by a very complex network of causal influences. Some of these conditions are going to come from the past: how we were raised, what language we have learned, what mistakes we have made, and so forth. All of those details are combining to influence who we are in the present moment. Some of the conditioning factors are going to be embedded in present circumstances: the mood we are in, the temperature of the room, the arising of a certain object of experience rather than another. Every situation is unique, and so much of what makes up the fabric of our lives consists of responses to changing circumstances in the environment. And much of how we construct a reality is also going to have some influence on the future: the attitudes and assumptions we bring to this moment effect the unfolding of phenomena for ourselves and others in the next moment, and the decisions and actions we take influence the causal chain of events leading to how the future will unfold for us. Not only will each successive moment of the mind be influenced by the immediately preceding moments, but sometimes apparently minor elements of present experience can plant seeds that come to fruition a long time from now. So the construction process

that is happening at any given moment has causal influences from the past, from the present, and it influences the future as well.

DISTORTING THE TRUTH

A fourth important insight of Buddhist psychology is the observation that our experience is constantly changing. We experience ourselves and our world as a parade of phenomena arising and passing away, one after another, in a seemingly perpetual flow. However much our senses may be taking in and processing information in parallel—and it is a prodigious amount of information—still constructed *conscious* human experience can only unfold in series, one moment after another. There are two consequences of this. One is that we can never, strictly speaking, be aware of two things in the same moment. When it appears that we are dong this, say the Buddhists, we are actually cycling between two or more modes of consciousness very rapidly. Another more significant consequence is that we can never have precisely the same experience twice. Since by definition each experience is constructed from elements unique to each moment, the phenomenology of the present moment will always reveal change and permutation. Even if we seem to be looking at the same object over time, we may actually be seeing it from slightly different angles each time, the lighting of the room can be changing incrementally, or the internal changes of our mood, assumptions, expectations, and so on are influencing what we see. When we recall a memory or conjure an image in our minds, it will always be constructed in somewhat different internal circumstances. Though we may be oblivious to much of this detail much of the time, the closer we look at the nuances of our experience, as meditation practice invites us to do, the more fluctuation and change we are capable of discerning.

The extent of the changeability of all that surrounds us and all we consist of is hidden from our view to an astonishing degree. This is partly due to the fact that the brain has evolved to distort the environment in a manner that helps us survive. The barrage of information that comes into the mind through the various sense doors is so vast and urgent that the mind has had to develop strategies to simplify and organize this data into manageable units. The Buddhist psychologists identify a number of distortions of perception, distortions of thought, and distortions of view that work on different levels of scale to contribute greatly to the flaws of human understanding.[7] One of these is the tendency to construct stability in a milieu that is profoundly unstable. The mind creates fixed images, ideas, and attitudes from the swirl of input, like snapshots of the flux, and then processes these as symbols of reality. Rather than opening up to the full range of sensory diversity at every moment, which would be tiresome if not overwhelming, the human mind, more often than not, is working from a vastly simplified copy

that has been generated by the mind itself. On the perceptual level this can be an icon or image stored in short-term memory against which the incoming data is checked from time to time for variations. For example, a cursory phenomenological examination of the blind spot caused by the exit of the optical nerve from the retina will reveal how a vast segment of our visual field is "filled in" by simple cutting and pasting. On the cognitive level, we develop a number of learned ideas that interact with one another in various sorts of processing activities. The idea itself becomes a sort of symbol that can be manipulated in the language of mental processing, but as a symbol it is taking its meaning not from careful attention to subtly changing circumstances each moment, but from a fixed or stabilized notion that has been constructed and then relegated to memory. And the same is true on the third level, the level of our attitudes or beliefs. We get in the habit of thinking of ourselves as a particular person with particular views, and we become accustomed to regarding the world in certain ways that have been learned and remembered. All our subsequent experience then unfolds within an often very narrow habitual range that has been defined by these views or beliefs.

Buddhist psychology recognizes that the products of these distortions of the mind are "mere" conceptual constructions. That is not to say that they are all false, since many provide useful, even crucial advantages in how we relate to the environment. In fact, their truth or falsity is not even a major issue, since they are virtual tools used for working in a virtual world. The important point is that they are only maps we create of a terrain, and all sorts of difficulties result in our taking the maps to be anything more than the conceptual constructions they are. In addition to the distortion of mind that stabilizes the impermanent world into quasi-permanent images, the Buddhists identify three others. We also create "things" and "persons" out of the flux of phenomena by creating certain artificial and arbitrary boundaries between "this" and "that" and between "self" and "other." That is to say, we construct the idea of the self from a milieu that is inherently without self. From the phenomenological perspective the world, along with our experience of the world, consists of a seamless unfolding of experience. Our patterning of this flow of both the objective and subjective worlds into definable units is another example of the mind projecting its meaning onto the world, and the objects and subjects that derive from this process of projection have no more than the provisional validity of conceptual constructions.

The two other distortions of the mind have to do, respectively, with the projection of "satisfaction" and "beauty" onto a flow of experience that intrinsically contains neither. Happiness or suffering is rightly defined entirely in terms of human desires that are either fulfilled or frustrated. Similarly, something is deemed attractive or repulsive according to the degree of projection of human

likes and dislikes. In both cases the distortions of mind are yielding qualia that have everything to do with the response of the organism to its own internal constructions, and very little to do with the nature of the environment itself. All this results in the insight that our view of the world and of our selves is something distilled from changing moment-to-moment experience into a set of ideas and conceptions that help interpret things for us. Useful inquiry into the nature of it all, therefore, will come not from the further manipulation of these derived symbols (which by this analysis consists of little more than a rearranging of deck chairs), but from deep examination of how the construction process itself takes place in the very moments of awareness that comprise our experience. The question is not What is the nature of the world out there? but rather, How does the mind go about constructing stability, identity, satisfaction, and beauty from an environment that itself lacks these qualities, and What are the consequences of these distortions for the subject who constructs them?

A COLLECTION OF AGGREGATES

A final component of the theoretical Buddhist psychology worth mentioning in this broad overview is the observation that the mind and body are manifest and reveal themselves in experience through five interdependent categories of phenomena called aggregates.[8] The aggregates are: a physical or *material* dimension to all experience that supports, nourishes, and molds the mental dimensions; the episode of awareness or *consciousness* through which each moment's experience manifests and knowing takes place; a *perception* or cognitive content by means of which we discern the qualities and features of any experiential object; a *feeling* or affect tone that is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; and a more complex function the Buddhists call *formations,* which have to do with the manifestation of various conative patterns in the construction process: patterns of intention and of action, and of the dispositions that are shaped by these over time. These five aggregates all arise and fall together as a unit, moment after moment, and neither one of them can be considered primary or more essential than the others.

We have already discussed the extent to which the early Buddhists recognized consciousness as an essential factor in the construction of experience, constituting at once the agent, the instrument, and the activity of experience. Consciousness is that which cognizes an object, the instrument by means of which the organ of perception is capable of knowing its immediate object, and is also itself nothing other than this process of knowing. But unlike idealists or soul-theorists both ancient and modern, this consciousness was understood by the early Buddhists as thoroughly interdependent with materiality. All attempts to

reduce one to the other were shunned, and in a manner that can be taken as strikingly modern in its scientific mood, consciousness and materiality were construed as cocreating one another. This stance not only embodies the mind firmly in materiality, but also allows for a significant degree of mental influence on the bodily processes. The four great elements themselves constituting materiality—earth, air, fire and water—can be construed in two ways. Physically, they manifest in various combinations to form the "stuff" we can trip over in the night; psychologically they manifest as the subjective bodily experience of resistance, movement, and heat (respectively; the cohesive role played by water is said by the meditative tradition to be experientially indiscernible). Consciousness itself, as we have seen, can take purely mental objects, as in the case of internal mental experience. But consciousness also stands as the sole means of manifesting the material world, since it is only through being cognized as a sense object that the vast range of physicality can manifest in our experience. We can perhaps begin to glimpse the profundity of the Buddhist insight that "the entire world is manifest within the fathom-long carcass"[9] of the human psychophysical organism.

The analysis of experience into five aggregates further recognizes that mind involves more than just consciousness, and emphasizes the functioning also of cognitive, affective, and conative aspects of the mind. The aggregate of perception, present in any moment of experience, supplies information about "what" it is we are sensing or thinking. We have learned through a lifetime of training how to make sense of the data entering our senses, and various systems and subsystems of the brain assemble these data into discernable categories of perception: blue, green, long, short, table, chair. These categories are to some extent built into the hard-wiring of our sensory apparatus, are greatly influenced by shared social conventions such as language, symbolic structures and culture, and are also shaped by a host of personal and idiosyncratic experiences throughout our learning process. While consciousness allows for the basic cognizing of an object to occur, it is perception that shapes our cognizing it as a particular object. The aggregate of feeling involves those functions of the limbic system that identify each experience as pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful. According to this model every single experience involves an affect tone: we either like it, dislike it, or "feel" neutral about it. How any given sense object affects us will also be determined by a range of influences, some of them built into the structure of the various nerve receptors, some conditioned by social or cultural factors, and some based entirely on unique personal history. This feeling tone has a huge impact on the dynamics of our minds and bodies, and understanding the influence of the pleasure/pain response on human behavior is a major part of the Buddhist analysis of experience. The aggregate of formations has to do with the conative loop created by the

choices we make, the actions we perform, and the changes of disposition these choices and actions then have on the psychophysical organism. The volitional choices we make in any instance will be heavily influenced by the dispositions remaining from previous actions, and will further mold our dispositions for the future. A process model of human personality and behavior emerges that allows for both a level of free will and a level of determinism, and which construes identity as a constantly changing pattern of activities and strategies rather than as a substantive entity. The Buddhist aggregate of formations also reveals a sophisticated understanding of unconscious processes in a model discovered entirely from the close attention to the working of the conscious mind.

A FRAMEWORK FOR HEALING

How does such a theoretical understanding of the human condition contribute to the practical and therapeutic goal of alleviating suffering and bringing about a deep sense of peace and happiness? In a number of ways. To begin with, the first step in any healing process is overcoming denial and recognizing that there are identifiable symptoms that need to be addressed. Because of the ways the mind tends to distort or mask some of the basic features of our experience with illusion, as described above, it is no small accomplishment to expose some of the ways this happens. The first step in the Buddhist process of healing, called in the tradition the first noble truth, points to the unsatisfactoriness of the human situation, and to the fact that suffering manifests in many ways we are not accustomed to acknowledging. The pursuit of pleasure, the avoidance of pain, the denial of change, the illusion of identity, the projection of beauty, the ignoring of death—these are all aspects of a daily coping strategy that is inherently limited in its ability to provide any lasting sense of safety, meaning, or fulfillment. The first thing the Buddha, as the Great Physician, does for us is to throw back the sheets and reveal the true nature of the mind and body. There is nothing evil or disgusting or inherently flawed about the psychophysical organism, it is just that it is suffering from an affliction and is in need of healing.

The second step to the healing process is to identify the causes of the illness, which is done in the second noble truth of the ancient medical formula employed by the Buddha. The problem turns out to be relatively simple: a thorn is embedded deep in our hearts, the thorn of craving or desire, and the agitation of its presence is driving us mad.[10] Like the injured lion made ferocious by the thorn in its paw, so also the human mind and body are driven by desire to act and respond in very unwholesome or unhealthy ways. The desire for relief from suffering only fuels behaviors which embed the thorn deeper and lead to further suffering. The desire that lies so deeply implanted in the human psyche can be

quite naturally accounted for, and manifests in two related but opposite ways. First we have the positive expression of desire, the desire to get, to have, to possess, to accumulate. This arises, in humans as in all other animals, in response to the experience of pleasure. We want more of what gives us pleasure, we want the pleasure to continue and to grow, and we want to organize our lives around the pursuit and preservation of pleasure. The negative expression of desire is the desire for pain to go away—the avoidance or denial of, the resistance to, the aversion or aggression toward what we do not like. Whatever does not give us pleasure, and especially whatever we identify with the experience of pain, is something we want to stay away from or destroy if we can. This too is rooted in primitive instincts of survival. Practical Buddhist psychology has mapped out the terrain of desire in great detail. Careful and honest introspection can reveal the dramatic effects these positive and negative expressions of desire can have on how all experience is constructed. In particular, we can see how often both forms of desire serve to motivate a dysfunctional response that the Buddhists call clinging or grasping. Pleasure and pain are both natural affective aspects of all experience, but because of the underlying tendencies of craving and aversion—the thorn embedded in the heart—they can trigger the pathological response of attachment. It is this attachment itself, according to the Buddha's analysis, that is responsible for the full range of phenomena we experience as suffering.

Why is it that we all seem to have this underlying tendency toward wanting pleasure to continue and pain to cease, and why do we so often act in ways that have just the opposite effect? It turns out that to the two aspects of desire we need to add a further basic cause of suffering: ignorance. The three factors are usually listed together—greed, hatred, and delusion—but these terms are just a shorthand for a list of dozens of afflictive mind states that grow out of these three roots. The notion of ignorance or delusion is used in a precise manner by the Buddhists. It is not a lack of intelligence or lack of capability, but rather the effect of the distortions of mind referred to earlier. Delusion is seeing what is impermanent as stable, seeing what is without self as possessing a self, seeing what is unsatisfactory as satisfying, and so forth. Desire is only present in the mind because of our lack of understanding around these fundamental aspects of experience. If we truly accepted that all things change, we would not expect pleasure to continue or pain to be effectively avoided; if we truly understood nonself, we would not become attached to people and things as if they were entities on which our happiness depends; if we could see clearly that there is something unsatisfactory, even in situations where we can cover its trail by pleasure, we might be able to open to what is painful and avoid the double injury of resisting or denying the inevitable. Desire and ignorance are interdependent, and each reinforces the other. So the second noble

truth of Buddhism identifies greed, hatred, and delusion as the root causes of suffering—whenever these are present in a moment's constructed experience, suffering is also being created.

The solution to the problem, then, expressed in the third noble truth, is the cessation of suffering by means of the cessation of desire and ignorance. The great discovery of the Buddha was that the pathological psychophysical dynamic causing suffering can be healed, and he demonstrated this by his own "awakening" under the Bodhi tree at Gaya. Notice that this is a practical, not a theoretical, accomplishment. The theory revealed the nature of the problem and pointed in the direction of the solution, but the culmination of the entire Buddhist program is in the radical transformation of persons. The Buddha went on to live for forty-five years as an Awakened One, a Buddha. During this time his experience was still ordered around the five aggregates—he had a body, was conscious, perceived, felt pleasure and pain, and made choices. But all this was ostensibly done without manifesting even a moment of greed, hatred, or delusion. The traditional way of expressing what happened to the Buddha that night is that the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion became extinguished (*nirvāna*). Knowing that everything was merely impermanent, conditioned, selfless phenomena, there was no motivation to cling to what was liked or push away what was disliked. Without the distorting projections of desires on to experience, he was said to be able to see phenomena clearly. Perhaps most important, the Buddha said that anyone can accomplish the same transformation, and spent his life teaching a very precise but flexible method to help others experience the same alleviation of suffering.[11]

The fourth and final of the noble truths is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. While the first three truths analyze and articulate the theoretical underpinnings of the human condition, the fourth truth has more to do with the practical task of purification and transformation. How to bring about the radically healing transformation of awakening is a matter of great diversity in the Buddhist tradition. All schools more or less agree on the first three noble truths, but thousands of years of tradition have elaborated greatly on the methods and strategies that can be used to get free of attachments and illusions.

PRACTICAL BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY

The first and foremost item on the Buddhist agenda for healing—not necessarily in its textual formulation but certainly in its practical application—is mindfulness. Since the entirety of our virtual world is being constructed in the present moment, it is crucial to learn to pay attention to this moment. Paying attention sounds simple; one might think we do it all the time, but we actually pay attention very little to what is going on in our present experience. The human mind is con-

stantly swinging into the future and the past, and like a pendulum it passes through the present moment barely enough for us to keep our bearings. There is nothing inherently wrong with the complexity and richness of the inner life that involves remembering and planning, imagining the future and honoring the past. The Buddhists are not saying that we should cut off our sensitivity to the full range of experience and live ordinary life in some sort of eternal present. But in order to get beyond some of the embedded habits of the mind, in order to get free of some of the distortions and confusions to which we are subject, we need to train ourselves to attend very carefully and very deliberately to the process by which we construct past and future experience in the present moment. And this is largely what mindfulness practice is all about. It is accessing the present moment, and it involves cultivating the intention to attend to what is happening right now. Left to its own inclinations, the mind would much rather weave its way through some thought pattern that makes us feel good about ourselves, and lead us away from any kind of insight that might threaten ours ideas about ourselves. It is, as we have seen, the predilection of our latent tendencies to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and this is as true in our subtle mental world as it is in the coarser sensory realm. It is not that the mind has to be beaten into submission (a not very successful strategy, on the whole), but it needs to be carefully and gently encouraged through constant practice to look carefully and deeply at what is unfolding in the immediately present moment. One can do this while driving a car, during a meditation retreat, or it can be done sitting here in this very moment: by simply attending carefully to what arises and passes away in experience.

The second endeavor that helps to further the practical process of seeing more clearly is noticing various aspects of behavior. We can use the interest and capabilities cultivated by mindfulness to notice what we are actually doing when we act, moment to moment. This too seems to be stating the obvious, but modern psychology reveals in ever-greater detail the extent to which so much of our behavior is unconsciously motivated and unconsciously executed. By noticing the texture of the mind in the midst of behavior—the taste of desire, the feeling of aversion, the inclination toward or away from some object of experience—quite a lot of unconscious patterning can be revealed. Attending to the details of behavior is a way of developing clarity about what is happening. Mindfulness involves taking activities and behavior that had been perhaps unconsciously conditioned and bringing them to conscious awareness. This awareness can itself be profoundly transformative. The Buddhist emphasis on ethics in behavior is not a prescription for right behavior as opposed to wrong behavior, but rather an invitation to notice the details and the nuances of one's own behavior. The act of witnessing what we do will gradually and naturally effect changes in the quality of our actions. One of

the ways this process is represented in the Buddhist tradition is through the use of the paired terms *wholesome* and *unwholesome* applied to the full range of mental, verbal, and physical actions. Because of a convenient play on words in the Pāli language, the words for wholesome and unwholesome, *kusala* and *akusala*, can also be taken to mean "skillful" and "unskillful." This places the whole field of ethical behavior in the realm of gaining understanding and capability rather than conformity to normative law. Thus the skills gained through mindful awareness of experience naturally flow into the skillful execution of behavior. Well-being itself, it turns out, is a skill that can be learned.

Another important tool for helping us get more clear in the practical psychology of Buddhism is learning to calm the mind. The delusions we are wrapped up in, according to the Buddhist analysis, are primarily fueled by restlessness; both inattentiveness and unskillfulness always arise in conjunction with an agitation of mind. Moreover, this restlessness or agitation is not intrinsic to the working of the mind, but is a mode of operation learned through culture and reinforced by conditioning. The mind is capable of attaining states of tremendous serenity and calm, but we seldom allow it the opportunity to settle in to these deeper states of consciousness because of our demands for constant information processing. As the mind gets quieter, it does get less capable of the far-ranging but shallow processing to which we accustom it, but rather than dulling the mind this deepening process greatly strengthens it. There are many metaphors in the Buddhist tradition that talk about increasing the power of the mind through the development of concentration.[12] One such metaphor likens the flow of consciousness to a mountain stream. If, on the one hand, there are many outlets to that stream, the force of the water at the bottom is going to be very small, since its hydraulic energy will be dissipated. If, on the other hand, one stops up those outlets to the stream, the flow of water at the bottom is going to be much more powerful. In the same way, the ability of the mind to be aware in the moment is dissipated by the complexity of our sensory lives, perhaps even more so now than was the case in ancient India. What has come to be called multitasking, the tendency to process information and respond along multiple parallel tracks, can be likened to the opening of the channels in the waterway. The mind's energy flows out through multiple channels, and perhaps even accomplishes a number of tasks, but each outlet is relatively weak and each task is attended with little mindful awareness. Calming the mind with meditation has the effect of closing off these sensory outlets so the quality of awareness strengthens and deepens. Then when the mind attends to something, it does so with the full weight of its capabilities. As when the point of a sharp blade of grass is carefully directed, the mind can in this mode penetrate the illusions woven by the con-

struction of experience in a way impossible to the uncultivated or undeveloped mind. It is important to recognize, of course, that as the mind becomes more calm, it also becomes more, rather than less, alert. The tranquillity that comes from concentration is not a sluggishness or drowsiness; the inherent function of the mind—awareness—is enhanced by its stillness, not impeded. Although to an outside observer the meditator may seem to be asleep or in a trance, the inner experience of the concentrated mind is quite active in its own way. So the practice of meditation, which is so central to most forms of Buddhism, involves the cultivation of a state of mind that is both tranquil and alert. That such a state is possible may seem unlikely due to our verbal tendency to define things using opposites, but it can be easily verified by personal experience with a little bit of training, a lot of patience, and some diligent application.

As the mind calms down and interest in the investigation of experience increases, a whole inner life opens up in great detail and texture.[13] This becomes the ground for the final step in the practical Buddhist program of transformation, the gradual, but sometimes dramatic, development of wisdom. Wisdom is not the same as knowledge, although the latter is helpful to its development. Wisdom involves the gradual and often very subtle growth of understanding—of the world, of experience, and of oneself. It is the antidote to the distortions and illusions mentioned above, and as such, wisdom holds the key to the cessation of suffering. Understanding impermanence, through clearly seeing the ways that the illusion of continuity is constructed, draws back one of the three principle veils obscuring our relationship to the objects of our experience. Understanding the unsatisfactoriness and the ultimately disappointing nature of whatever is impermanent illuminates how we are habitually driven by attachment to what is pleasing and aversion to what is displeasing. And understanding the extent to which substances and self-identity are manufactured and then projected onto all experience removes the final obstacle to what the Buddhists call "seeing things as they really are." The progress of insight into these three characteristics is termed *wisdom*, and as it develops it considerably changes the way we construct ourselves and the way we respond to unfolding events. It turns out that the Buddhist notion of the cessation of suffering has to do with a major transformation of how we construe ourselves and our world. The change is from habitually and unconsciously responding to things with attachment and aversion, to gradually increasing the ability to manifest equilibrium in the midst of experience. This state of equanimity culminating the path is often confused with detachment or disengagement, but most Buddhists would argue that just the opposite is the case. When the various egoistic illusions and projections are withdrawn, one is capable of a much greater intimacy and a fuller involvement with every aspect of experience.

The final awakening (*sambodhi*) or cessation of suffering (nirvāna) to which both the theoretical and the practical elements of Buddhist psychology progress, has been the subject of much puzzlement and confusion. In the earliest literature of the tradition, it seems to be defined primarily as the absence of the three basic roots of all unwholesome and unskillful states: attachment, aversion, and misunderstanding (i.e., greed, hatred, and delusion). All of human suffering can be seen to emerge from these three fundamental human psychological reflexes. But through the systematic practice of training in awareness, behavior, concentration, and wisdom just outlined, it is possible for humans to radically transform and even eliminate these unconscious tendencies of the mind, and it is the result of this process that the Buddhists are calling awakening. Although the notion of nirvāna inevitably took on religious and mystical connotations, and quite rightly functions as a symbol of an ultimate apotheosis in the Buddhist tradition, from the practical perspective of the early teachings the term is embedded in a psychological context. The awakening of the mind from the slumber of its delusions is something that happens to a person in this lifetime, as it did to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, and the concept does not make much sense other than as a transformation that occurs to a person. More specifically, the transformation involves the extinguishing (lit. nirvāna) of the three unwholesome roots, which are latent tendencies of the human mind, and thus the liberation of a person from all forms of suffering. It need not be considered anything more than this, but more significantly, neither is it anything less.

Properly understood, this teaching left by the Buddha, along with his own example of its fulfillment, is a remarkable legacy that can challenge and inspire people of all generations throughout the world, both past and future. We are entering an age when the understanding of the human mind, the last great frontier of scientific knowledge, is beginning to advance dramatically, and if we allow it, a tremendous contribution can be made by the study of this ancient but universal science of the mind. As we bring modern knowledge into contact with ancient wisdom, something unique and dramatic may very well unfold. The dialogue is just beginning.

NOTES

1. For an intriguing new look at this issue, see Goldstein, J. (2002).

2. For a fascinating ancient account of some of these differing theories, see the Samaññaphala Sutta (1987).

3. The Samaññaphala Sutta (1987) is also an excellent place to see the description of a comprehensive and systematic program of developing these practices of observation

and analysis. See also the Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta, or "The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness" (1987).

4. This sentiment is expressed by the adjective *"ehipassika"* applied to the teaching of the Buddha, a word meaning literally "come and see." We also find this attitude in the Kālāma Sutta (1999) and in many other places in the early literature.

5. An excellent, if dense, presentation of this model of perception can be found in the Chachakka Sutta (1995).

6. For a brief discussion of the elements, see the Bahudhātuka Sutta (1995).

7. The classical reference for these distortions (*vipallāsa* in Pāli) can be found at Anguttara Nikāya 4:49 (1999). My alternative translation, with commentary, can be seen in Distortions of the mind: Angutarra Nikāya 4:49 (2001).

8. These aggregates (*khandha* in Pāli, *skandha* in Sanskrit) are discussed in many places throughout Buddhist literature. Some basic explanations are accessible in the Mahāpunnama Sutta (1995), the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta (1995), and Alagaddūpama Sutta (1995), as well as the entire Khandhasamyutta (2000).

9. Anguttara Nikāya, 4:45, and so on.

10. This compelling image is described in a poem found in the Attadanda Sutta (1985). See also my translation with commentary in "The thorn in your heart: Selections from the Attadanda Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta" (1999).

11. The story of the Buddha's struggle for awakening and accomplishment of the task is well told in the Bhayabherava Sutta (1995), the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (1995), the Mahāsaccaka Sutta (1995), and the Mahāsīhanāda Sutta (1995).

12. See for example the Samaññaphala Sutta (1987). Other useful similes can be found in Anguttara Nikāya (1973) 5:23, 5:51, and 5:193.

13. It is said of one of the Buddha's greatest disciples Sāriputta, for example, that he had "insight into states one by one as they occurred" (Anupada Sutta, 1995).

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